

09/03/92

**SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke**

The portion of the July trip to Alaska, 90 miles back into Denali National Park, characterizes Smithsonian expeditions. All their junkets have special parts hard for the ordinary traveler to manage.

We were warned, for example, not to whistle because the winds may distort the tune and make a hungry bear think a fat bird was close at hand. Every evening after we were dismissed, I practiced whistling George Gershwin music dating back to when men packed high powered, large bore rifles, and tried to recall the opening anthem to the National Rifle Assn. meetings.

Park Rangers said to play dead in a grizzly confrontation, and climb a high tree if black bear gives chase. But first, "be sure what kind of bear is after you." Grizzlies, it was explained, won't climb trees and black bears aren't fooled by possum acts.

Out in the mosquito marshes, playing dead proved impossible, and trying to reach a limb three feet too high was hard to do with out a real bear to increase adrenaline sufficiently for the leap.

On one hike a bus driver let slip a story about a group down the road being a penned in by several grizzlies fighting over a mother bear and her cubs. Quite a bit of

space was precariously held by the people, nevertheless, they felt surrounded. None, including the guides, were sure whether the males were planning on killing the cubs, or staging a fierce courtship for their mother. A bear expert rushed in and rescued them.

With our binoculars we'd spotted a huge blond grizzly lying on his back feet shone in the afternoon sun. Under magnification, his shoe size was about an 18-D. We'd been warned that grizzlies had been clocked at speeds up to 41 miles per hour. Barkers at Carnivals quoted how fast the fattest lady in the world runs, but making an accurate comparison of a bear 600 feet away and a sideshow act 3000 miles to the south with different track conditions was unworkable.

Also, a guy who had studied surveying 40 years ago in an Iowa agriculture college and myself had discovered that different latitude readings were throwing us way off on speed and distance calculations. Geodetic surveys showed Mount McKinley's highest peak to be 20,320 feet. New figures claimed the mountain was 20,306 feet.

In rare glimpses of the mountain, we kept coming up with a distance of 27 miles, or 142,500 feet. We stepped our base line four times, estimated the angle of the sun and figured the reflection of a tall tree in a lake. One thing

was noticeable: the more people who found out what we were doing, the more room we had to work out our problem.

On the last morning in Denali, a wolf was spotted high on a mountain chasing a band of goats and their kids. Through pair of borrowed German binoculars, the show seemed closer than if we were up there. Mountain kids and mothers were split off on small ledges, and the wolf continued to divide them into smaller bunches. Alaska has between 5000 and 10,000 wolves to feed. Eskimos sound sort of picky about the wolves killing their reindeer, but thinking constantly of food sources dims an aesthetic appreciation of the wilderness.

Time prevented checking the altitude of McKinley. One thing to say in favor of the wolves is they kill coyotes. A wolf expert told us coyotes were scavenging in broad daylight around some outposts for fear of being killed by the wolf packs.